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The Indonesian Armed Forces (ABRI)

Role, Prospects And Implications

by Patrick Cronin and Marvin Ott

Conclusions

- Indonesia's stability is increasingly challenged. Unlike the rock-solid Indonesia of several years ago, Indonesia appears to face mounting domestic unrest at the very time that its strategic role in the region is looming larger. Uncertainty about the future of Indonesia concerns the United States, because *any instability in this pivotal Southeast Asian nation is inextricably linked to stability throughout the entire Asia-Pacific region.*
- Much of the uncertainty concerns the prospective political succession to President Suharto. As the President's age increasingly poses the succession issue, it is not clear that there is a strong set of institutions to guide a smooth transition. In fact, *the only truly integrated national institution is the armed forces (known by its Indonesian acronym, ABRI).* Exactly because of ABRI's central role in Indonesia, it is essential that the United States and its friends in the region understand the Indonesian military.
- Any analyst of ABRI knows that *Indonesian military officials have enormous and growing respect for the professionalism of the U.S. Armed Forces*-and for the Australian military as well. Thus, contacts with the United States have an unusually important and potentially enduring impact on Indonesian officers.
- *The United States needs to have an active, comprehensive and long-term plan for engaging ABRI.* Fortunately, the United States and Indonesia have numerous contacts beyond the recently curtailed IMET exchanges. Joint exercises and high-level staff talks, for instance, are just part of our current engagement. But as we look toward the future, we need to see how we can be even more actively engaged with the Indonesian armed forces.

The Three Events

Indonesia is in the midst of a protracted political transition. No one knows how it will play out, but all agree that the military will be a pivotal actor. Within this context, three recent events have caused a reexamination of the current state of Indonesia, its armed forces, and its relations with the United States.

1. *The first key event was the parliamentary election at the end of May.* The Suharto government intended it to be a reaffirmation of the regime and the system. Indeed, the long-ruling party, Golkar, won with more than 70 percent of the vote. However, widespread incidents of violence and the removal of Megawati Sukarnoputri from the leadership of the PDI opposition has to some extent led to quite the opposite result. The pressures for change are seen to be deep and growing. Signs of increasing societal tension are evident as national political institutions have weakened. This, paradoxically, has left the Indonesian Armed Forces, with its administrative structure down through the provincial to the local level, with an increasingly important role in guiding Indonesia's transition into the next century.

2. *The second key event was the recent reshuffling of the military leadership and what it portends.* Following the elections, President Suharto changed a few senior military personnel. Most notably, General Wiranto was appointed the new army chief, and there is wide press speculation that he will take over from General Feisal Tanjung as armed forces chief next year. The reshuffle was significant because it demonstrated Suharto's continued power to impose his will on the most senior military appointments. In purely military terms the more important personnel shifts will come in the next 6-12 months when dozens of senior officers in ABRI reach the mandatory retirement age of 55. This will usher in a new generation of military officers, most of whom will have graduated from the military academy in the first half of the 70s.

3. *The third key event was Suharto's letter to President Clinton on 2 June announcing that Indonesia no longer had a need for F-16 aircraft or participation in the International Military Education and Training program (IMET).* This action can be interpreted in one of two ways. First, the rejection may be a manifestation of growing xenophobia and anti-Americanism, which would bode ill for the future of bilateral relations. Alternatively, and the view to which we subscribe, it is a damage control initiative by the Indonesian government aware of the bloodletting likely in Congressional debate over the arms sale to Indonesia based on concerns about human rights, particularly with respect to East Timor. As such, it was designed to protect, not diminish, the U.S.-Indonesian security relationship. In this regard, it is noteworthy that Indonesia has recently granted U.S. military aircraft badly needed access to the major air-to-ground target range on Sumatra.

Military Professionalism

For four decades the ABRI has been committed to a unique "dual function" (*dwi fungsi*) role in which it serves to protect both internal and external security, but also to participate actively in civil administration and economic development. For example, all provincial governors on Java are ABRI officers. Among other things, this means that the term "professionalism" has a different meaning than it does in the West. For ABRI, professionalism encompasses administrative and even political functions as well as the profession of arms. As Suharto's power has grown, he has gradually curtailed ABRI's overt political role. The number of military officers in the Cabinet, for instance, has steadily declined. Senior ABRI officers speak reluctantly and circumspectly on political topics. This has led some analysts to suggest that the emerging ABRI leadership lacks the political sophistication of their predecessors. Others warn against selling them short and note that the younger officers are quite impressive in personal contacts with their Western counterparts.

Another concern related to professionalism is the promotion, apparently at Suharto's initiative, of "Green" (i.e., strongly Muslim) officers for very senior posts-notably former Army Chief of Staff, Hartono. This has led to speculation concerning a Red and White (traditional nationalist) versus Green (Muslim) rivalry within ABRI's leadership. Because these categories are used by Indonesian analysts

themselves, they should not be easily discounted. Nevertheless, many close Western students of ABRI are skeptical that the distinctions are deep and believe that ABRI's top commanders are essentially united in their support for secular governance and *dwi fungsi*. It is almost axiomatic that the degree of unity within ABRI will have an important bearing on a Presidential succession and political stability more generally.

Professionalism may also be defined in more narrowly military terms. Australian as well as American analysts have detected growing ABRI professionalism in this sense as evidenced by the first real strategic planning for the defense of the Natuna Islands and their incorporation in the broader defense of the nation.

The Single Surviving Institution

By increasingly consolidating power in his own hands, President Suharto has had the effect of "deinstitutionalizing" the country. ABRI has also been negatively affected, but far less so than opposition political parties, the press, and traditional ethnic and religious institutions. This has left ABRI in a comparatively stronger (and politically more exposed) position as the one institution capable of acting effectively nationwide. As signs of popular unrest have begun to grow, ABRI finds itself in the uncomfortable position of forcibly imposing the regime's authority in the name of law and order. ABRI commanders have consistently tried to maintain close ties with the general populace as a necessary precondition for *dwi fungsi*. ABRI's discomfort in the role of political enforcer was evident in its loyal but reluctant implementation of the President's order to remove Megawati as head of the PDI. If political conditions deteriorate and ABRI has to repeatedly put down unrest, some analysts speculate that a point may be reached when military commanders will try to force political change.

Succession Scenarios

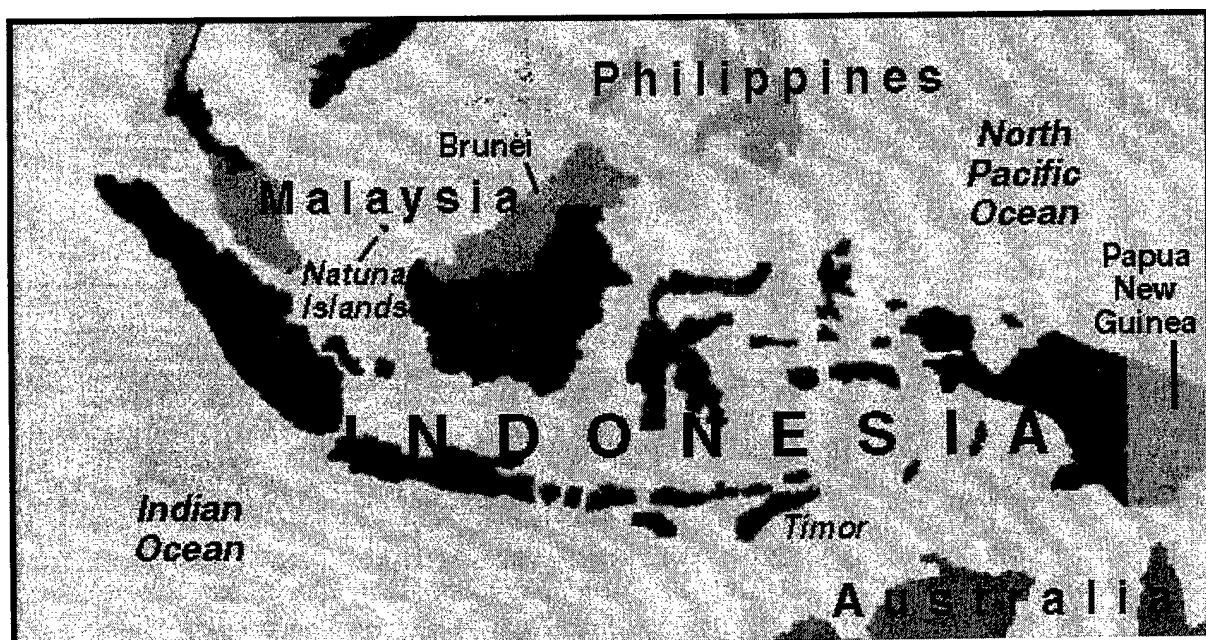
The only thing certain about political leadership succession in Indonesia is that it will happen eventually. President Suharto has given no indication that he is prepared to retire. Many Indonesians feel it is time-having held power for over three decades-for him to leave office. But few are prepared to try and push him, in part because his advanced age seems to offer a natural solution. Paradoxically then, Suharto's age becomes a further source of his power. Analysts differ whether his increasing tendency to surround himself with appointees to high positions (including ABRI) who are personal loyalists is a sign of strength or weakness. It does suggest a regime that is in danger of becoming isolated from popular sentiment and from those who are willing to speak truth to those in power.

There are two primary succession scenarios. First, Suharto may not be well next March at election time. In this case, the vice president (retired General Try Sutrisno) would take over. He would have to turn to ABRI as his primary base of support. Alternatively, Suharto may be in good health next March and he and his nominated vice president will run and be elected. The real test will be when he does finally leave office. In this case, in accordance with the constitution, the vice president would take over. If ABRI did not approve of the vice president, it could, through entirely constitutional means, move to replace him (or her). ABRI would declare a national emergency and call a special session of the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR). Through its national administrative network it could control the selection of delegates to the MPR (as it did with the selection of PDI delegates in the removal of Megawati) and thereby the selection of a new president. Most analysts believe ABRI would insist on the selection of a president from the active or retired ranks of the army.

Clearly, either succession scenario is likely to result in a more enhanced role for ABRI.

East Timor

East Timor remains a bone in the throat of Indonesian foreign relations. As an issue, East Timor carries with it two particular negatives: (1) it puts the focus on ABRI under very unfavorable circumstances and (2) demands for East Timor's independence pose a threat to the territorial integrity of Indonesia as a whole. ABRI as well as other elements of the Indonesian government agree that change and compromise are needed to bring the situation to a satisfactory conclusion before the issue erodes Indonesia's international prestige even further. To date Suharto has rejected publicized proposals for change, but he has implicitly sanctioned an active search within official circles in Jakarta and Lisbon (Portugal was the former colonial authority in East Timor) for a "third way" between the status quo and full independence).



Implications for U.S. Policy

Indonesia is the largest and most important state in Southeast Asia—a region of rapidly growing economic and security importance to the United States. Indonesia is also the keystone to regional stability. The remarkable success of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has been due in substantial degree to Indonesian policy.

In the past, ABRI has been focused almost entirely on domestic concerns and sharply restricted contact with the armed forces of other countries. In recent years, however, this has changed and ABRI has been increasingly open to contact and cooperation with its ASEAN partners, as well as the United States and Australia. These contacts include military education and training for ABRI officers, military sales, ship visits, joint exercises, official visits, intelligence sharing, and joint use of facilities. In this context the recent cancellation of the F-16 purchase and IMET participation is a setback. Indonesia had originally agreed to the F-16 purchase in response to a U.S. request. The proclivity of Congress to see U.S.-Indonesia ties as a morality play defined by the words "East Timor" and "Riady" will put continued pressure on the U.S. side of the relationship.

Nevertheless, it is solidly in the American interest for the U.S. military to strengthen its multidimensional relationship with ABRI—the most likely guarantor of Indonesian stability in the potentially uncertain days ahead. Also, U.S. policy toward Indonesia should run on a parallel track with Australia. The interests of Canberra and Washington are closely aligned. Australia has no desire to displace America in the region or in its relations with Indonesia.

While IMET and arms sales have in recent years become secondary to other military-to-military activities, the fact remains that the IMET program has been the key to U.S. influence with the ABRI leadership. Many rising senior officers have been trained in the United States. The absence of IMET removes the single best way to influence the younger ABRI officers—the leaders of the future. There is already a five-year gap in officers who have spent time in the U.S. and been exposed to American views on human rights, civilian control of the military, and general international affairs. While the other elements of a military-to-military relationship already mentioned are critical, IMET was the key to bringing the relationship to its current level.

Recommendations

- The Department of Defense should take the lead in devising a long-range engagement strategy for ABRI. The rationale for this strategy, must be clearly articulated to senior policy makers, members of Congress, and the public in general.
- Notwithstanding Indonesia's voluntary withdrawal from IMET (because of Congressional opposition), senior policy officials should support DOD attempts to restore IMET funding. At the same time, DOD should continue to strengthen and further diversify contacts and programs

between U.S. and Indonesian military personnel at all levels.

- The United States should coordinate its efforts closely with officials in Canberra. Together, the United States and Australia can help increase the chances for regional stability as Indonesia inexorably moves toward a successor regime by early in the next century.

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